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Iran 1: What Needs to Be Known

Six weeks into the Iran-contra crisis, the public remains adrift with only scattered facts to grasp in a sea of questions. They are pressing questions. The crisis arises not because of a partisan desire to punish the President but because of the widest fears that leadership and orderly governmental process have broken down.

What is known suggests enormous misjudgments; the justifications remain clothed in silence, or partial explanation. What is known suggests arrogance about obeying the rules; the background still hides who decided what. The facts at hand suggest violations of law; it's not possible to discern whether they were willful.

One way to understand the story so far is to organize the facts around the gaps and then judge what needs to be known about the Reagan Administration's policies concerning Iran, covert war in Nicaragua, hostages and terror, Congressional involvement in foreign affairs and, ultimately, Presidential responsibility.

The 'Moderates': How Moderate?

The Administration made contact with Iran through intermediaries at a wrenching time. Officials had information about Iranian complicity in terrorist incidents in the Middle East in which Americans were killed or taken hostage. Yet officials who fully understand Iran's extraordinary geopolitical importance began receiving reports that "moderates" there wanted to improve relations with Washington.

No one would cavil at exploring such feelers with great care. There are few signs of care. Was there hard evidence of Iranian involvement in the terrorist moves? Was there a real basis for believing the "moderates" actually wanted to curtail terrorism and enhance ties? Exactly what was the logic behind the idea that selling arms to an extremist regime would help "moderates"? Or were they seeking arms only to break open the Iran-Iraq war? The known facts make the Administration's conduct look alarmingly casual and shallow.

Strengthening Iranian moderates and freeing hostages are goals America shared with Israel. The C.I.A. and Robert McFarlane, then the national security adviser, pressed for action. Israel began shipping American-made weapons and spare parts to Iran. Conversations with the Iranians turned to an arms-for-hostages deal. The Israelis made at least two shipments during 1985. One hostage was released in September.

Did the Administration recognize that, once exposed, this arrangement would contradict its every denunciation of Iran and terrorism? There might have been yet another contradiction depending on what kind of arms were sent. Quantity and quality could have emboldened Iran to fight harder in the war against Iraq.

Even if these considerations caused no hesita-

tion, why didn't the law? Estimates of Israeli arms sales to Iran in 1985 range from \$12 million to \$1 billion. U.S. law requires that Congress be notified for sales over \$14 million. Did President Reagan specifically approve these transactions, as Mr. McFarlane and the Israelis say, or not, as Attorney General Edwin Meese claims? The question reverberates. The answer is important not as some smoking gun but because it can show whether Mr. Reagan was in charge at the beginning or whether the policy machinery was already out of control.

Mistakes Magnified

Last December, the Administration withdrew whatever approval it had given to the arms sales. A month later, over the objections of Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, President Reagan directed the C.I.A. to exchange more arms for hostages. Large quantities of antitank and antiaircraft missiles were sold, at a huge profit. More hostages were released — and more taken.

The perils of this policy were vastly magnified, meanwhile, when Oliver North, an aide to John Poindexter, the new national security adviser, used the profits, deposited in a C.I.A. Swiss bank account, to purchase arms for the contra rebels in Nicaragua. What, if anything, did Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Shultz know of the sales to Iran this year, even while they continued to inveigh against any such acts? Why didn't those others who knew in one way or another raise objections or tell the President the truth?

Apparently at Iranian instance, a Lebanese magazine revealed the Iran deals on Nov. 3. Attorney General Meese investigated, and he and the President disclosed pieces of the story. Even at that point, Mr. Reagan spoke of only one planeload of arms. Was he still unaware of how much more was shipped, and if so, who misinformed him?

Who Acted on Whose Authority?

The truth now known already stings. The rest needs to be known. If, as reported, Mr. Reagan decided against notifying Congress of the covert arms shipments to Iran, was he violating statute? The question bears on the Administration's larger attitude toward the law. Perhaps it felt that it could imperiously disregard not just the law but its own past policy statements as well.

What makes these questions so troubling is the possibility that the President truly didn't know what was happening — and that subordinates felt free to take such actions on their own authority. If similar failures are to be averted, such shortcomings of policy, process and people have to be uncovered. One way or another, the public and the President need to know, so we can once again trust and he can once again lead.